

A Secular Contract, A Sacred Calling

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Jacques Maritain and Some Christian Suggestions for the Education of Teachers

by Wade A. Carpenter

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?" According to third-century Christian apologist Tertullian, not much.¹ From precisely the opposite perspective, the twentieth-century "secular humanist" John Dewey would have echoed Tertullian, although he was as greatly indebted to Christian thought as Tertullian was to the pagans; he would have described himself as deeply religious, while explicitly rejecting religion. Between the two is the remarkable thirteenth-century synthesis of reason and religion by St. Thomas Aquinas, applied to modern education by the twentieth-century philosopher Jacques Maritain. As the other essays in this issue suggest, Maritain's thinking provides a Christian corrective to Deweyanism for public as well as private school-teachers who wish to honor both their sacred callings and their secular contracts. Although most of the contributors see Maritain as starkly opposed to Dewey, the two philosophers have, I believe, enough in common (beyond their amply documented kindness) to be synthesized for classroom purposes by intelligent and informed teachers, whether they be believers or not.²

Dewey and Maritain would both agree that teachers must be intelligent and informed . . . in other words, not just trained, not just prepared, but in the process of being *educated*. This is, of course, problematic—the contempt in which teacher education is held by arts and sciences scholars is well-known, as is the disrepute in which it has long been held by teachers. In our era of standards-based accountability, mindless "bags of tricks," and interpretations of "highly qualified" teachers referring only to subject-matter preparation, for a teacher to be really educated will more than ever require a vision of worthier goals, a knowledge of a

wealth of alternatives, and the initiative to pursue those goals and alternatives.

Goals of Education

Both Dewey and Maritain were keenly aware of the importance of the world outside the classroom. Teachers swamped by the needs and demands of their students may often forget that world, but ideologies, policies, and standards *will* impact their ability to meet the needs of the kids in their classrooms. Dewey was admirably sensitive to those inputs from the community and had an eye for the “ends in view”—the social function of the school in developing the intelligent uses of intelligence. However, Maritain considered Dewey’s goal inadequate, his “growth toward more growth” (*Democracy and Education*, p. 51) falsely modest, relativistic, and de-liberating. There are objective truths, created by an intelligent Truth, for the benefit of intelligent creatures made in His image:

The freedom of which we are speaking is not a mere unfolding of potentialities without any object to be grasped, or a mere movement for the sake of movement, without aim or objective to be attained. It is sheer nonsense to offer such a movement to man as constituting his glory. . . . The aim, here on earth, will always be grasped in a partial and imperfect manner, and in this sense, indeed, the movement is to be pursued without end. Yet the aim will somehow be grasped, even though partially. . . . Truth—that which does not depend on us but on *what is*—truth is not a set of ready-made formulas to be passively recorded, so as to have the mind closed and enclosed by them. Truth is an infinite realm—as infinite as being. . . . No one is freer, or more independent, than the one who gives himself for a cause or a real being worthy of the gift. (*Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 11-12)

Maritain saw Dewey’s “scientific” view of man as helpful, but inadequately nuanced and hardly ennobling. Contrary to some conservative Christian assumptions that Dewey was excessively “permissive,”³ Maritain saw Deweyanism as insufficiently providing for the richness of the individual person, and in danger of reducing education to “the training of an animal for the utility of the state” (p. 5):

The job of education is not to shape the Platonist man-in-himself, but to shape a particular child belonging to a given nation, a given social environment, a given historical age. . . . He is endowed with a knowing power which is unlimited and which nonetheless only advances step-by-step, [who] cannot progress in his own specific life, both intellectually and morally, without being helped by collective experience previously accumulated

and preserved, and be a regular transmission of acquired knowledge. In order to reach self-determination, for which he is made, he needs discipline and tradition, which will both weigh heavily on him and strengthen him so as to enable him to struggle against them—which will enrich that very tradition—and the enriched tradition will make possible new struggles, and so forth. (p. 2)

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His view of the person was not incompatible with Dewey's—a naturalism "that was as humane as his humanism was naturalistic."⁴ Nonetheless, it went considerably beyond it, viewing man as

an animal endowed with reason, whose supreme dignity is in the intellect; and man as a free individual in personal relation with God, whose supreme righteousness consists in voluntarily obeying the law of God; and man as a sinful and wounded creature called to divine life and to the freedom of grace, whose supreme perfection consists of love. (Maritain, p. 7)⁵

Maritain would be much more sympathetic with the view of Blaise Pascal that "only in transcending himself does man become fully human": "Know then, proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Humble yourself, weak reason; be silent, foolish nature; learn that man infinitely transcends man, and learn from your Master your true condition, of which you are ignorant. Hear God."⁶ Gerald Gutek's analysis earlier in this issue—that Maritain's view of cognitive development is naïve and out of date—may well be correct, but if one sees Maritain as discussing *faith* development, one finds him quite congenial with the current studies of James W. Fowler.⁷ However, Maritain's lofty view of the humanizing process may not be compatible with the standardization currently called "reform" by some political conservatives; he respects the teacher more and requires more of that teacher than do the periodic efforts to "teacher-proof" the curriculum,⁸ but he is also historically informed and thus a far cry from the "current best practices" touted by modern progressives.

Methods of Teaching

It would be misleading to assume from this that Maritain was hostile to the teaching methods promoted by Dewey and his followers. Over and over he praised them, but with caveats:

The means are not bad. On the contrary, they are generally much better than those of the old pedagogy. The misfortune is precisely that they are so good that we lose sight of the end. Hence the surprising weakness of education today. . . . [t]he

child is so well tested and observed, his needs so well detailed, his psychology so clearly cut out, the methods for making it easy for him are everywhere so perfected, that the end of all these commendable improvements runs the risk of being forgotten or disregarded. (p. 3)

Further,

The old education is to be reproached for its abstract and bookish individualism. To have made education more experiential, closer to concrete life and permeated with social concerns from the very start is an achievement of which modern education is justly proud. Yet in order to reach completion such a necessary reform must understand, too, that to be a good citizen and a man of civilization what matters above all is the inner center. (p. 16)

And in contrast to the perception of Catholic education as being centered on “the nun with the ruler,” at no point was Maritain tougher than when he condemned that stereotype: “Education by the rod is positively bad education. . . . Any education which considers the teacher as the principal agent perverts the very nature of the educational task” (p. 32). Certainly the teacher is more than a “guide on the side” in his thinking:

An education which consisted in making the child responsible for acquiring information about that of which he does not know he is ignorant, an education which only contemplated a blossoming forth of the child’s instincts, and which rendered the teacher a tractable and useless attendant, is but a bankruptcy of education and of the responsibility of adults toward the youth. (p. 33)

This would suggest that part of teacher preparation should include training in how to lecture. I rarely find practicing teachers who have had *any* training on doing lecture well. “Teacher talk” done badly is, indeed, the terrible thing our progressives make it out to be. However, teacher talk done well can be enormously helpful to those trying to deal with such content-rich areas as world history and literature. Maritain understood the value of challenge, but knew also that challenge is not the same as brutality:

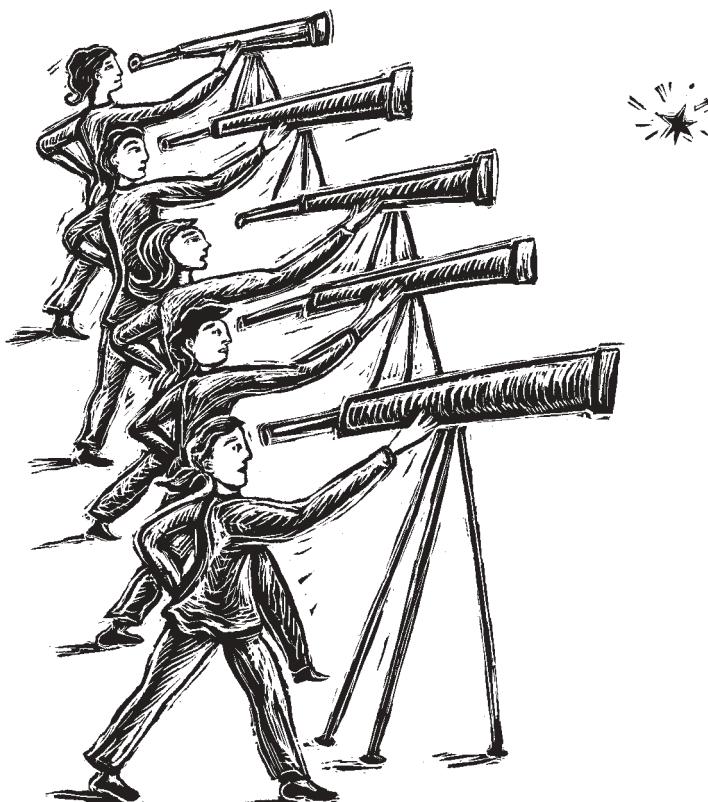
[W]e may wonder whether an education which yields itself entirely to the sovereignty of the child, and which suppresses any obstacle to be overcome, does not result in making students both indifferent and too docile. . . . However that may be, it is still true that birch and taws are bad educational measures. (p. 32)

The teacher is to be an authority, but the child is not a passive receptacle for testable trivia: Maritain warned of the dangers of behavioristic “training of the subconscious” (p. 42) in particular and coercive instruction in general:

[W]hat matters most in the educational enterprise is a perpetual appeal to intelligence and free will in the young. . . . Nothing should be required of a child without an explanation and without making sure that the child has understood. (pp. 9–10)

Further,

In asking a child to read a book, let us get him to undertake a real spiritual adventure and meet and struggle with the internal world of a given man, instead of glancing over a collection of bits of thought and dead opinions, looked upon from without and with sheer indifference, according to the horrible custom of so many victims of what they call “being informed.” (p. 44–45)



This might suggest that teachers of faith be conversant with the ancient spiritual reading technique called *lectio divina*, in which the reader prayerfully reads a small “bite” of a sacred or intellectually profound text each day very slowly and meditatively, followed by a significant quiet period for meditation on it, followed by silent and even wordless prayer—contemplation—followed by ongoing rumination on the passage through the rest of the day.⁹

Perhaps most important for teacher preparation is Maritain’s corrective to Dewey’s “problem solving” approach to teaching. Certainly Maritain acknowledged the vicissitudes of life and the need for orderly, intelligent thought and experiment, but he worried that Dewey’s overemphasis on problem solving might lead to a “superstitious trust in techniques” (p. 40), a formulaic approach to thinking exclusive of intuition and imagination, and a negative view of the creation God considers good.

Thinking begins not only with difficulties, but with *insights*, and ends up in insights which are made true by rational proving or experimental verifying. . . . In the field of education this pragmatic theory of knowledge, passing from philosophy to upbringing, can hardly produce in the youth anything but a scholarly skepticism equipped with the best techniques of mental training, and the best scientific methods, which will unnaturally be used against the very grain of intelligence, so as to cause minds to distrust the very idea of truth and wisdom, and to give up any hope of inner dynamic unity.” (p. 13)

Bruce Kuklick’s splendid intellectual history *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* makes me wonder if perhaps Dewey’s problem-centered approach to teaching and learning may have its origin in a residual New England Calvinistic view of nature as a wilderness to be conquered, without a balancing view of life as a gift to be enjoyed. I would not go further toward any psychobiography of Dr. Dewey, but I might suggest that future teachers reflect on their own assumptions about nature, competition, social Darwinism, and the life of man—is it, as Hobbes said, “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short,” or is it also rich in opportunities for generosity and altruism?¹⁰ How might that more balanced view affect one’s teaching?

In a related thought, remembering Aquinas, Maritain views with disapproval a practice I myself have long considered benign: “never to dig a ditch [in front of your students] that you fail to fill up” (p. 50). While leaving questions open for the students to work out on their own is certainly a useful strategy in college-level studies, do I overdo it and leave the students without scaffolding for life? Can I do a better job of discerning when to avoid what Paolo Freire disdainfully called “banking”—

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overly didactic—instruction (Maritain referred to it with equal disdain as “the assumption that knowledge is a cramming of material into a bag,” p. 52), but when to avoid its opposite, what we might call “potholing”? Gutek is right in arguing that Maritain would reject at least the “radical” versions of constructivist teaching: “To raise clever doubts, to prefer searching to finding, and perpetually to pose problems without ever solving them are the great enemies of education” (p. 50). However, I am not so certain Maritain would disapprove of the more moderate version once advocated in this journal by Sam Hausfather.¹¹

Likewise, Maritain took a more balanced view of the nature of teaching. Play is extolled, but for its own sake, and not as a substitute for serious study (p. 55). Tellingly, he lamented:

Even from a naturalistic point of view it is a pity to see the child’s mysterious expectant gravity and his resources as regards the spiritual life neglected or trampled upon by his elders, either from some positivistic bias or because they think it is their duty, when they deal with children, to make themselves childish. (p. 61)

Quoting Robert Maynard Hutchins, he noted:

The child-centered school may be attractive to the child, and no doubt is useful as a place in which the little ones may release their inhibitions and hence behave better at home. But educators cannot permit the students to dictate the course of study unless they are prepared to confess that they are nothing but chaperons [*sic*], supervising an aimless trial and error process which is chiefly valuable because it keeps young people from doing something worse. (p. 65)¹²

Similarly, Maritain took a balanced view of the role of the school, in some contrast to Dewey’s almost messianic hopes for it. On one hand, Maritain was aware of the dangers of psychological and social traumatization and the transmission of prejudices by the family (p. 24), but he was also reluctant to give too much responsibility to the school, afraid that in its properly “whole child” approach to learning (including the spiritual!), the school might go too far beyond “preparation,” thereby “making the youth a victim of stupefying overwork” (p. 24). In trying to be all things to all people, the school may become a tyrannical appendage of what we would now call the “nanny state” (p. 100). On the other hand, acknowledging the miseducation prevalent in Nazi German schools of that era, Maritain was startling in his denunciation of the “dark side” of instruction, urging that any school which “inculcates

sectarianism and intolerance, racial or political fanaticism, worship of hatred or enslavement" be dissolved (p. 106).

Although throughout his book he emphasized the importance of a liberal education, Maritain had a surprising spin on the technical-professional aspects of teacher preparation. He was decidedly lukewarm on what we would call "professional orientation" courses, regarding them as "stimulating beginnings and attempts" at a comprehensive mental world, but still as more of "a compensation and a palliative" (p. 49). Psychology and methods courses too have a different, protective twist, remembering Hippocrates' maxim "First, do no harm."

[T]he teacher must be solidly instructed in and deeply aware of the psychology of the child, *less in order to form the latter's will and feelings than in order to avoid deforming or wounding them by pedagogical blunders.* (p. 27, emphasis mine)

Although I may be more sanguine than Maritain about the positive value of such courses for teachers, shifting a bit more toward minimizing the damage schools can do strikes me as supremely practical, while also calling for a more intellectual, reflective version of such course work. Certainly my teacher-education students headed for high school teaching are much less tolerant of "mickey mouse" funsies than are my early childhood education students; they are upset and embarrassed when their dormmates unfairly disparage courses in "Crayons 101" and other less printable epithets.

Dispositions to Be Fostered

I'm reluctant about applying the word "dispositions" to Maritain's recommendations, given the current "politically correct" and sentimentally banal usage of the term by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. Certainly Maritain attached considerably more importance to the cognitive aspects of learning, but he also advocated developing an affectively positive, integrated personality—"The main point is surely to be a good man rather than a learned man" (p. 20). In another interesting twist on Dewey's distaste for dualisms, Maritain sought to end the dualisms between the spiritual and the secular, work and contemplation (p. 89). The "end in view" of Maritain's education would be a love of truth, a love of good and justice, and "even the love of heroic feats" (p. 37). Such a teacher would be a person who "exists gladly" who works passionately (Maritain notably does *not* enshrine *hard* work!) and cooperatively. Above all, such a person would be grateful, uplifted, and inspired by the knowledge of the gifts we have been given. Certainly such a teacher would not shed a proper critical spirit, but he would balance it with a habitual awareness of the beauties of life, which

would be characteristically reflected by a graciousness in his teaching and living: "Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy."¹³ In an era of adequate yearly progress, bureaucratic overload, political malfeasance, teacher bashing, student apathy, parental hostility, and professorial despair, for which future teachers are given little but "problem solving" formulae and instructional "bags of tricks" with which to cope, what a difference such an attitude might make in the life of a teacher.

Notes

1. Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*, trans. Peter Holmes, vii, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian11.html>.

2. One must be careful in quoting Dewey, since he is notoriously easy to "get wrong." Hence, I will in this article generally rely on my own understandings and on Dewey scholars I have found to be especially knowledgeable and sagacious, in addition to Dewey himself. Jacques Maritain, though, was no less profound but was vastly more accessible, so I will generally let him speak for himself. In researching this article and assembling the other materials for this issue, I have come to a new admiration for both authors. Essential readings must include Dewey's epochal *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916) and Maritain's *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943). I would recommend reading them in that order, and with little interval, so that their positions *vis-à-vis* one another may be clearest. Especially fair-minded and contextualized commentaries on Dewey are given by Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) and Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); on Maritain, Daniel McInerny's *The Common Things: Essays on Thomism and Education* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press/American Maritain Association, 1999).

3. For example, Sam Weaver, "John Dewey: The Father of Progressive Education," 8 March 2004, <<http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/weaver/040308>>.

4. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey*, 100.

5. Maritain is thus careful to avoid both the "progressive" temptation to romanticize the child and the "fundamentalist" tendency to see him as totally depraved. For a highly nuanced study of Christian anthropology, see Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

6. As translated in John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 30 (1670; Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), s.v. *Pensées*, 434.

7. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981); and Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992).

8. The attempts to "proletarianize" the job of teacher are nothing new, dating at least to Joseph Lancaster's "monitorial system" and "advancing" to Frederick Taylor's "scientific management," to the currently popular Saxon Math, and finally (one hopes) to the intellectual abortions being set forth increasingly by

state legislatures. For suitably scabrous views of this history, see John Taylor Gatto's *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1992) and *An Underground History of American Education* (New York: Oxford Village, 2005). For more scholarly and restrained accounts, see Raymond Callahan's classic *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (1962; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) and David Tyack's *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974). See also Marilyn Wilson, "NCLB: Taylor-Made for Deskilling," National Council for the Teachers of English (2004), <<http://www.ncte.org/about/issues/slate/117626.htm>>.

9. There are many fine books on *lectio*. I recommend beginning with Michael Casey's *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph, 1995) and *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer* (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph, 1996).

10. *Leviathan*, chapter 13. I have rarely found a more thought-provoking treatment than the hagiographical short story of "The Best Teacher I Ever Had" by David Owen in *Life*, October 1990: 70. Great teaching of a deplorable world-view.

11. See Linda D. Alkove and Betty Jo McCarty, "Plain Talk: Recognizing Positivism and Constructivism in Practice," *Action in Teacher Education* 14, no. 2 (1992): 16–22, for the kind of extremely subjectivist version of constructivism that Maritain would reject; and Sam Hausfather, "Where's the Content? The Role of Content in Constructivist Teacher Education," *Educational Horizons* 80, no. 1 (2001): 15–19, for a more realistic view that would respect objective knowledge while maintaining an openness for student-driven learning.

12. See Robert Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), 70–71.

13. Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (1948; New York: Gordian Press, 1975), 153.

Wade A. Carpenter is an associate professor of education at Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia.